

Book Production

Beyond the Family Tree: Writing Your Family History

Summary by Darcy Boock of presentation by Renee Garrick

Renee Garrick was the speaker for the October SCVGS meeting. Renee was a high school English and speech teacher in Red Wing, Minnesota, for 20 years. She started her own small editing business called The Grammar Queen in 2010. In 2014, Tristan Publishing in Minneapolis became one of her clients, where she is an independent contractor. When she is not editing, Renee has time to work on her own genealogy. You can secure her services at renee@thegrammarqueen.net or 651-327-9686. Her website is thegrammarqueen.net.

Writing your family history is a process. You have been researching and collecting facts and other information on your ancestors for years. But when should you stop researching and start writing? Renee Garrick suggests that you start writing now. Don't worry about font selection or size, formatting, or what photographs or images to include, just write. Will you write your own story or that of one or more of your direct ancestors? Will you include collateral lines? Decide whose story to tell and start writing that manuscript.

Writing takes lots of preparation. Make it a habit to set aside an amount of time to write each day or on particular days each week, rather than concentrating on the number of words to write per session. Or better yet, pick a specific time and make an appointment with yourself to write—keep that appointment! Perhaps you can find a friend who is also writing and together you can find times to check in on each other regularly. Don't worry about where to start your story as you can always add more to it. Focus on writing just a chapter at a time or a section of the chapter and be flexible. If you are missing some information, highlight the text or type it in red to remind yourself to come back to it later, thus not having to interrupt your thought process to look for that piece of missing information.

Organize your book by Part I, Part II, chapter titles, and sections or subheadings within each chapter. Include the resources used to verify facts and list those in footnotes or endnotes for each chapter. If you have decided to write about your grandparents or great-grandparents, you may choose to dedicate one chapter to each of them. Include historical events that happened during your ancestor's lifetime to help bring the story alive. Using newspapers will also add interesting content to your story. Include things you are wondering about but haven't yet been able to prove. Do you want to write chronologically or theme-based?

When you have completed a chapter of your writing, read it aloud, which will help you hear how the story flows. Do you have good transition from one section to another? Have you used the best words and phrases to tell your story? Each little story should be entertaining and have a beginning, middle, and end. You will write and rewrite many times. Are the chapters arranged in such a way that they tell your story the best possible way? Are the sections of a chapter arranged in the best order?

As you write, don't worry now about inserting photos or document images (maps, vital records, church records, ship passenger lists, etc.). Rather, place brackets where the photo/image should be inserted later and give a brief description of it within the brackets in all caps. This method will allow you to quickly find where a certain photo should be placed. Create a separate Word document for all the photo captions using a standard format that includes names of all the people in the photo from left to right, the approximate date taken if known, where taken, and what was happening in the photo.

At some point you need to set up a Style Guide that contains the rules you will follow throughout your writing to make it consistent. The Style Guide includes the font style and size to be used for chapter titles, subheadings, the body of the text, captions, etc.; spacing after a period and after paragraphs (one space after a period, not two as you learned in high school), format of dates, use of italics and brackets, etc. You should also list the variant

spellings of your ancestors' names. In using foreign words always place them in brackets in italics with the English translation provided. Email Renee and request her free Style Sheet Template.

It is easier to read serif fonts (ones that have little feet), so choose one such as Times New Roman or Garamond, font size of 11 or 12. Sans serif fonts (ones with no feet) such as Century Gothic or Arial should be used for captions, headings, and chapter titles. Sans serif fonts are also easier to read online if you are writing a blog or creating a website. You can also use the *Styles* suggestions in the top tool bar on the home page of Microsoft Word to assist you.

When scanning photos to be used in your story, scan them at a minimum of 300 dpi, although 600 dpi is better to prevent graininess. Organize your photos chronologically by branch of your family tree. Create a folder on your computer for your book and subfolders for each chapter of your book. Place the photos to be used in each chapter in the appropriate folder, so they will be easier to find when you are ready to insert them into your Microsoft Word document.

Keep all those unidentified photos you have, because at some later point, you may discover their identity. Finding cousins through DNA matches may provide additional photos or help identify those previously unknown. Maureen Taylor's podcast [The Photo Detective](#) or her [blog](#) will help you in dating your photos. Whether it is the style of clothing worn or the type of photograph taken (tin type, cabinet card, etc.), with her help you should be able to narrow down the time period. If you use photos in your publication that others have provided, be sure to get permission to use them and give them credit in the captions. Since pictures taken for church directories or school pictures are copyrighted, you cannot use them.

If self-editing or having a friend edit your manuscript, look for grammatically correct sentences: correct spelling and punctuation, consistent tense of verbs, and text that flows well. When you have finished writing, rewriting, and editing, you are ready to format your pages and place your photos/images and captions. Be mindful of another edit followed by proofreading before your book is ready for the publisher.

Your book can be self-published or taken to a publisher. You have the choice to print in all black and white or in all color, which is extremely expensive. So even if you have just a few outstanding color photographs that you want to include, the entire book will be printed in color. A vanity publishing company will format your book, edit it, proofread it, provide a cover design, and often market it all at your expense. This option can become quite costly for the author. Search the Internet for the many options for self-publishing. For a small book, Shutterfly is a good option, especially for colored pictures, but always wait for a coupon. Watch for a free book offer or 50% off. Sometimes you will find a special deal for unlimited pages at the same price as the regular 32-page book. Never pay full price at Shutterfly.

Plan, write, rewrite, edit, proofread, and publish your story to share with family and friends. That is the process of book production. But don't wait; start writing now.

Editors Note:

If you plan to write a comprehensive family history, search the Internet for *Parts of a Book* to help you write your manuscript. You need to eventually think about the design of your cover and title page, write your preface and introduction, include a table of contents and index, and think about what will be included in the appendices at the back of your book, all beyond writing the body of your manuscript. Also include an *About the Author* section accompanied by a photo. One of my favorite quotations to encourage you all to write is, "When a family member passes away, they take a library of memories and stories with them. It is a genealogist's duty to record them before that happens." — author unknown